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ABSTRACT

In the United States, illiterate adults account for 20 percent of citizens over age 16. Yearly, 5 percent of these adults without a high school diploma are enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) courses, which offer few appropriate counseling services. In order to study the counseling services available to ABE students in Maryland, on-site visits of current facilities and surveys of participants were conducted. On-site visits gathered data on the size and scope of the program, counseling materials, scope of counseling services, and projected program needs. Survey information was gathered from counselors (N=27), teachers (N=119), and students (N=848) of these programs. The student survey focused on the types, sources, and availability of assistance; the teacher survey incorporated the student survey, and sought information on student numbers, counseling related activities, and counseling needs. The counselor survey incorporated the two previous surveys and documented the types and number of direct services, and in-service training needs. An analysis of the findings led to a recommendation for the development of comprehensive counseling services on three levels: (1) entrance services should advertise availability of services, provide orientation, and academic planning and support groups; (2) on-going services should monitor academic progress and provide career guidance and support; and (3) exit services should include pre-exit interviews and follow-up. It was concluded that an array of paraprofessional and professional service providers would be most beneficial in meeting the ABE students' needs. (BL)

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COUNSELING SERVICES FOR
ILLITERATE ADULTS

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COUNSELING SERVICES FOR ILLITERATE ADULTS

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Current estimates place the number of illiterate adults in the United States at approximately 20% of citizens over age 16. This means that one adult in five lacks the basic skills necessary to get along in our society. These figures refer only to those adults who have not completed high school (St. John Hunter and Harman, 1979). They do not take into account those who have graduated high school, but may still be functionally illiterate. Of those without a high school diploma, approximately 5% in any given year are enrolled in adult basic education (ABE) courses, where they hope to upgrade their literacy skills. Some may even earn a high school diploma through this process. For adults enrolled in ABE programs, there are generally very few appropriate counseling services available. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that over 50% of students who enter the ABE program will drop-out during the first year!

This paper presents the finding and recommendations of a study of counseling services in Adult Basic Education (ABE) Programs in Maryland which was sponsored by the Adult and Community Education Branch of the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) as part of an Adult Education Special Project Grant for 1980-81. The project, had the following goals: (1) to gather information on counseling services provided to ABE students in Maryland; (2) to assess the need

for future counseling services; and (3) to design a model program of counseling services.

To accomplish these goals the following strategies were implemented: (1) a review of previous research was conducted; (2) pertinent documents, reports and materials obtained from the MSDE were reviewed; (3) personal interviews were conducted with the coordinators of the local ABE programs and with teachers, counselors, and students; and (4) survey questionnaires were used to collect additional information from students, teachers and counselors.

Traditionally, counseling services have been most closely connected in our society with secondary education. Today, almost all adults in our society who attended high school have had some contact with a "guidance counselor." This well established pattern goes back as far as 1907 and the establishment of the first school guidance program. Of more recent origins, have been the extension of counseling services upward for college students and downward for elementary age students.

Less well developed, has been the establishment of counseling services for the "adult student." This euphemism has been coined to cover a truly heterogeneous population: adults with high school, college and graduate degrees returning to school for more training; retired persons and senior citizens seeking enrichment; women returning to school (at all levels of education) after years as homemakers; and finally, the adult basic education student. In assessing current practices in counseling adult students, it is evident that a clear dis-

inction has not always been made between adults who have completed secondary and post-secondary education and the ABE student. While both groups have some needs in common, the illiterate adult has some very special needs.

The ABE student needs support in what can be a threatening and demoralizing situation (Caldwell, 1978). To accomplish this, ABE students need: to understand the mechanics of the program; to set realistic goals for themselves; to learn what resources are available to them; to deal with their fears of education, past and present; and to experience a feeling of group support for their current academic undertaking.

In reviewing a number of suggested approaches for counseling the ABE student, it became apparent that there was no simple "universal" model for ABE counseling services. In fact, the array of ideas and information presented was somewhat overwhelming (Porter, 1970; Grabowski, 1975; Perrone, 1977; Campbell, 1979).

II. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Turning from the literature, the next strategy for gathering information involved on-site visits to ABE units in Maryland to study current practices in the delivery of counseling services. Interviews about counseling services in local Maryland ABE programs were held with: 19 program Coordinators; 44 Teachers; 13 Counselors; and 28 Students.

The structure for the interviews was based on the topics outlined in the Counseling Information Survey Form (CISF), designed specifically for this study, and the information gath-

ered was summarized according to the categories listed on the CISF. These included: general background information on the size and scope of the program; documentation of counseling program materials; descriptions in writing or orally of the scope of current counseling services; and projected program needs.

We found an amazing heterogeneity in terms of depth and breadth of services being provided in local units. Furthermore, the quantity and quality of service seemed to bear little relationship to: (1) size of student population; (2) whether or not a "counselor" was available; (3) or the knowledgeability of personnel about counseling.

In order to expand upon the information collected by on-site visits and interviews, we next distributed over 1,000 surveys to students, teachers, and counselors in ABE programs.

Students were asked if they had sought help with a number of difficulties while they were in attendance at A.B.E. programs and, if so, from whom they sought assistance. They were also asked to indicate whether or not a counselor was available in their program. If no counselor was available, they were asked to indicate how interested they might be in having counseling assistance with a number of concerns. Information on age, sex, and length of time in ABE classes was also collected.

The Teacher Surveys listed the same concerns as those presented in the first section of the student survey, and asked teachers to indicate how many students they assisted

with each. Teachers were also asked to identify counseling related activities in which they had an interest as indicators of potential in-service areas. The third part of the survey inquired what services teachers saw counselors currently performing (when one was available to them). If no counselor was available, teachers could indicate how they might utilize the services of a counselor.

The Counselor Survey had three parts. The first part was identical to that of the teacher survey, listing the same student concerns and asking for the numbers of students assisted with those concerns. The second part asked for a specification of frequency of engaging in actual counseling functions. The third section asked counselors to make choices among an array of topics for in-service training and also requested demographic information.

The order of distribution of surveys was based on our decision to survey all counselors whom we were able to identify across the state (N=35). Further, we sampled 40% of ABE teachers across the state and attempted to sample 10 students for each teacher surveyed.

Completed surveys were received from 27 (77%) counselors; 119 (59%) teachers; and 848 (42%) students, a satisfactory return for this type of survey.

III. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings we recommended that local ABE programs begin to build a program of counseling services which would

address the needs of students as they enter, participate in, and leave the program. These components of a model program of counseling services were identified as: Program Entrance Services; Participation and Retention Services; and Exit Services.

In the remainder of this paper, we will give examples of some services for each component, and offer some recommendations for staffing patterns to deliver the services.

A. Program Entrance Services

First, our findings clearly indicate that local programs need to communicate to the general public, to students in their programs and to teachers about the availability of existing counseling services. Advertising in newspapers, brochures, and flyers should describe either the kinds of services offered directly by each program and/or the availability of such services via the program's referral network. Letting prospective students know that participation in the ABE program will put them in touch with an array of support services may provide an added incentive for enrolling.

Second, orientation of students to the ABE program should include a description of the program and the counseling services provided either directly or by referral, and a clear understanding of what students can anticipate as an adult learner. By this we mean that students need to be "forewarned" about possible pitfalls, discouragement and "falling by the wayside." A mechanism should be established for encouraging the "pre-exit interviews" so that students see this as an integral expectation

for participation in the program. Responsibility and coordination of this program component should be delegated to one staff member or volunteer, if no counselor is available.

Third, students also need to have an initial assessment of their skills. With few exceptions, most programs rely on teachers to perform this service. Overall, this seems to be a generally acceptable practice, and we found no reason to alter this.

A fourth aspect of this component involves academic program planning, including self-appraisal and goal setting. The essence of this component might best be stated, "Tell it like it is." Everyone---students, teachers, counselors, coordinators---is concerned about helping students with realistic goal setting and planning. One might liken it to the task faced by the physician who must tell the accident victim that "You will get better, but you may never fully recover." No one wants to be in that position. However, it is clear that students who enter ABE programs are fighting significant odds and a "full recovery" may not be possible. We recognize that this is a sensitive area, and one in which ABE personnel clearly are asking for help.

In-service training in adult motivation, and on how to effectively guide students in goal setting is an expressed need for both teachers and counselors. Striking a balance between communicating the reality of the challenge students face, and encouraging possible achievements is probably the single most complex task for the ABE staff and needs to be

addressed through comprehensive in-service programming.

Finally, we found that there is presently almost no use made of a support group system for ABE students. We recommended careful consideration of the implementation of such groups as a major component in the delivery of counseling services beginning at the time that students enter the program. There is clear evidence that support groups are highly relevant in aiding individuals to achieve significant behavioral changes. In programs which employ counselors, this should become a primary task for the counselor, and in other programs other staffing alternatives should be explored. For example,

- . Counselors could regularly visit classes and lead group discussions.
- . Informal "drop-in" discussion groups might be run ABE centers before or after class by counselors or trained peer or paraprofessional counselors.
- . Teachers can be trained to use discussion groups during times regularly scheduled for this purpose.

Obviously these strategies represent different types of commitments to this principle requiring different levels of resource commitment.

B. Participation and Retention Services

This component of the counseling program would include a mechanism for monitoring student progress via records of grades, test scores and other indicators of progress. In most educational settings responsibility for this typically falls under the counseling service. However, in ABE programs, teachers

seem to be doing this quite effectively, and with some in-service training in the use and interpretation of standardized instruments, could readily continue to do so.

There was a clear mandate from our survey data for the inclusion of career development and planning services as a part of the counseling program. With one or two notable exceptions, we found present practices in this area to be exceedingly haphazard. Students, teachers and counselors all gave clear indications of the need, relevance and desirability of this service for ABE programs.

By contrast, our findings led us to conclude that in-depth personal counseling should not be included in our model program. Students clearly did not seek or expect this, nor do the programs have the resources to deliver it. Instead, we recommended support of the current practice of teachers showing interest in such concerns with a view toward referring students to appropriate agencies in the community.

Finally, we recommended the continuance of the initial support groups. Research evidence continues to document the efficacy of this approach in the maintenance of significant life changes and clearly, the ABE student undergoes such a change by returning to the classroom. To-date, there are virtually no efforts to incorporate this mechanism as an integral part of ABE programs. Once these groups are established, they should be maintained for students who continue in the program. We anticipate that well-run support groups may make a critical

difference in the retention of students in the program.

C. Exit Services

This component is designed to address two distinct groups: program dropouts and "graduates." With regard to the former, we found that most programs had adequate provisions. However, in most instances teachers were responsible for initiating follow-up, and we recommended that a "volunteer" counselor would enhance delivery of this service.

As part of the orientation process we would also recommend that students be encouraged to contact an identified resource person before they decide to leave the program. Students should be told that often people drop-out when they might be aided to continue with just a little effort. By making a concerted effort to encourage "pre-exit interviews," programs may see a significant improvement in student retention.

With regard to program graduates, we found no systematic follow-up efforts currently in practice. The benefits of gathering information on graduates for enhancing program evaluation, and the potential use of alumni in a variety of "peer modeling" situations seems evident.

To implement this array of services we further recommended that they be provided by an array of individuals, not just a counselor. Thus we included coordinators, teachers, students (peer counselors), volunteers, and paraprofessionals as a part of the counseling program personnel.

In the instances where a counselor could be funded, we recommended that they function as program developers rather

than as "individual service providers." They would be expected to develop those components of the proposed program which are lacking in their system. Thus, one counselor may devote energy to enhancing the career development component, a second the use of group support systems, and a third the development of a referral and resource network. Counselors who are prepared to work on program should not be hired or retained by ABE units with limited resources for such personnel. A combination of in-service training and more definitive expectations of counselor functions is clearly in order to upgrade their contributions to ABE programs.

In conclusion, it is important to understand that the development of counseling services for ABE students is in its infancy in Maryland as well as in other areas of the country. The model program which has evolved from this study is only the first step in a long developmental process. Hopefully, it sheds some light on where we are, and where we may wish to go in meeting the counseling needs of illiterate adults.

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